

The House of God

Who likes to play games? My family likes to play **Apples to Apples**, a silly game that requires no thinking or strategy but instead creates a lot of wacky comments and laughter. Just last week while on vacation in OC, we tried a new game that Peggy Edmonds told me about: **Bananagrams** – it’s a lot like **Scrabble**- but people play individually at the same time. Our family really likes it. The letter tiles come in a banana-shaped zippered pouch. So after we had ordered our food in the restaurant, I excitedly pulled it out of my purse for us to play. Our son, Nick, who is 21 years old looked at me with those *you’ve got to be kidding eyes* as he firmly said, “No, no Mom. We’re not going to play here.” Evidently I still possess that uncanny ability to embarrass my son in public – sorry Nick.

But I promise not to embarrass anyone here. This morning, right now, let’s play a word association game. I will say a word and you say *out loud* the first word that comes to mind. (For example, if I say dental floss - you might say excitement!) Ready? Jimmie

Cone_____. Post Office _____. Gas Station _____. Library
_____. Church _____. Did anyone say **God**? (for church?) Just like Jimmie Cone makes us think of ice cream, hopefully- *some where down the line*, the word **church** makes us think of **God**.

The church, as a building, hasn’t always existed. In the book of Acts 11:26 (after Jesus’ death and resurrection) we learn that *For a whole year [the disciples] met with the church, and taught a large company of people; and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians*. During this early time, the word “church” meant the **act** of gathering together instead of our present day association with the building or the people. For the disciples, the Roman leaders did not consider Christianity to be a religion, so Christians met wherever they could-

mainly in their own homes. While in their “house churches”, the temptations and difficulties of the outside world were left behind, and the real meaning of life was found in their faith.

Eventually, the number of believers outgrew the “house churches” and buildings were built specifically for worship. The concept of God’s presence in a specific dwelling place developed with our I Kings reading today. But what does all of this mean and how does it connect to our lives nearly 3,000 years later? Let’s pursue that thought this morning.

For those who are *Indiana Jones* movie enthusiasts, the Ark of the Covenant might make you think of the 1981 movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Keep in mind that in this movie, the Ark of the Covenant is depicted as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas creatively interpreted it. So at least for this morning, let’s try not to think of the Ark of the Covenant as a box with the power to create thunderstorms or kill Nazis (as depicted in that movie).

Instead, let’s recall the biblical history of the ark. Originally, the Ark of the Covenant represented God’s presence with the people and had three important items inside: the Ten Commandments (written on 2 stone tablets telling of the foundation of God’s covenant with tribes of Israel), Aaron’s staff (God miraculously made it bud with blossoms so the rest of the tribes of Israel would know that God wanted Aaron to be in charge of the priesthood) and a pot of manna (food God miraculously provided for Israelites in their 40 years of wandering in the desert). The Ark of the Covenant was housed in the Tabernacle- a temporary tent-like structure that could travel easily- moving with the people as they journeyed to the Promised Land.

And now in the Promised Land, King Solomon has just completed a 7 year building program. He has produced a magnificent temple made from the finest building materials donated by neighboring Kings. This meant that everyone in the land knew just how marvelous the Jerusalem Temple was, and that it was all to the glory of God! So 953 years before Christ was

born, King Solomon had the Ark of the Covenant brought into the glorious Jerusalem Temple. He dedicated the house of God with a speech and prayers. This was followed by an enormous offering of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep that resulted in a public feast for 7 days. The dedication of God's presence in the house of God was a huge celebration!

During his speech, King Solomon asked, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Through Scripture, we already know about God's presence with God's people up to this point - in fire at the burning bush, at Mt Sinai with the 10 commandments, in the pillar of cloud as they crossed the Red Sea, in the Ark of the Covenant constructed while wandering in the wilderness, in the Tabernacle and now in this Scripture, in the Jerusalem Temple.

Today nearly 3000 years later, as Christians we have the answer to King Solomon's question, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" "Yes, in Jesus Christ." We know that God's presence was *most fully revealed* in Jesus, also known as Emmanuel meaning *God with us*. In our Gospel reading this morning, we are reminded that Jesus is the bread of heaven. Just as the Israelites received manna from heaven to live, we have received the witness of Jesus' life. As followers of God, Jesus is our example in how to live our lives as a pleasing and holy offering to God. So not only did God dwell on the earth with Abraham, Moses, Solomon, in Jesus as God in human form and with Jesus' disciples, but God continues to dwell on earth through you and me.

The Bible tells us God created humanity in God's image. And because God so loved the world, he gave us the gift of Jesus to give us eternal life and to show us how to live. And now, after Jesus' death and resurrection, God's Holy Spirit leads us in the way (to live). This means that as a church community, we are interrelated and able to do much more collectively than we can do individually. Thankfully, God's Spirit is **always** at work in us whether we know it or not. This explains the why of sometimes in our faithful lives, we suddenly get goosebumps, tears in

our eyes, we feel the hairs stand up on the back of our neck or we feel warm all over, because in that holy moment- we can sense ourselves opening up to God. Thankfully, this is because God's Spirit has **already been at work in us**. This is often sensed during worship.

Worship allows believers to experience God's presence in the house of God. Through the singing, the praying, even the Prayer for Illumination, the Scripture Reading, the sermon, the puppets, the dancing, the bells, the Baptisms, the Communion - God's Word is spoken to each one of us. As we open our hearts and minds to God's Spirit that is *already present and working* in all of those parts of worship, we realize our response to God's Word is through how we live our lives. This is a practice that gets easier the more we do it. But sometimes, how we feel can get in the way.

Worship begins with the attitude we bring when we enter the house of God. Did the argument that we had with someone keep us from letting down our guard before God in worship? Or if on Sunday morning we awaken in a bad mood, do we bring it to church? Do our worries and frustrations through the week bring us closer to God through prayer so that we look forward to our connection with God in worship? If not, we can today start being prayerfully conscious of the attitude we bring to worship. And if we're fortunate to already be aware of our worship attitude, we can continue to offer our best before God.

When we do manage to free our cluttered hearts and souls before God in worship, what does this mean for you and me as followers of God? Simply this: We are able to experience God's presence. And when God's Spirit touches our soul, we are moved both in how we feel and how we live. So that when we leave, we are filled up with the love of God as we seek to be the church outside of these walls. This awareness changes the way we treat others - even when it's not what we feel like doing.

Jesus encouraged us to love not just the lovable people in our lives, but also our enemies. Jesus gave us the example of healing the sick, loving your neighbor, and serving the least of these- what society doesn't emphasize. Yes, that's where the popular folk song says it all to people outside of the house of God: *They'll know we are Christians by our love*. During my childhood in the 1960s, there was a popular bumper sticker that always made me stop and think: If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Just think of yesterday and how you lived it. What does your life say?

Thankfully, our loving grace-filled God gives us many opportunities to try, try again. And that's why everyday is a new day, so that we can begin again. And that's why we're all here today – to fill up our spiritual tanks from the overflowing well of God's love so that once we leave this place, we can share God's love with others.

So let's play the word association game one more time. Jimmie cone_____
 Post Office _____ . Gas Station_____. Library_____
 Church_____. You _____.

Is the love of God associated with your name? If not or even if so, then joyfully receive and fill up your spiritual tank on the presence of God's love this day, in this place, in this *House of God* so that you may carry it not just to Damascus, but to your home, to your work/school and to the ends of the world. Amen.

Let us pray,

Loving God, you have created each one of us in your image. Help us to accept that gift and to allow your Holy Spirit to direct us in how we live our lives. As we open our hearts to you in this house, may we be filled to overflowing with your love. Help us share that love with others as we leave this place. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.